Yet to be answered are numerous questions concerning the Laffite project. Where is Juan Dell and the casting from which the statues were cast? Where were the coins minted and where are the dies? How many statues were cast, and where are they at this time?

Members interested in purchasing coins from the Chamber’s current inventory, please contact the Galveston Chamber of Commerce, 2106 Seawall Boulevard, Galveston, Texas, 77551 (409-763-5326).

13 March 1995

Champ D’Asile

French Filibusters on the Texas Frontier

Andrew W. Hall

With the final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in June 1815, there came to an end one of the longest and most costly series of wars seen up to that time. France had been almost continually at war for more than 20 years. Napoleon was removed to exile at St. Helena, a remote British colony in the South Atlantic, and Louis XVIII reinstated the monarchy in France. Although the Bourbons were remarkably lenient toward most Frenchmen who had taken an active part in supporting first the revolution and, later, Napoleon’s attempts to create an empire, hundreds of French military officers chose to leave their homeland and continue their lives abroad. They remained loyal to Napoleon, and dreamed of the day when he would be restored to power.

Many of these exiles settled in Philadelphia. The city already had a large population of French emigrés. This number swelled in 1815-1816, and efforts began to secure federal land grants to enable them to settle permanently in the U.S. The Congress eventually made the Frenchmen a large grant of land in western Alabama, near the Tombigbee River. But the majority of Frenchmen were not particularly interested in beginning an agrarian settlement and, already short of cash, quickly sold off their land titles to speculators.

During this period, Charles Lallemand, a former general in Napoleon’s inner circle, de-
vised a plan to establish a military encampment in what is now Texas. The plan seemed feasible, for although the area was formally claimed by Spain as part of Mexico, the viceroy's government in Mexico City was besieged by revolutionaries. There was no effective Spanish government in Texas, and Lallemand believed that his encampment would be safe from Spanish resistance. Although Lallemand and his officers never acknowledged the encampment's true purpose, it is now commonly accepted that the Frenchmen hoped to use the base to launch a military campaign that would topple the Spanish government in Mexico and enable Frenchmen loyal to Napoleon to create a new empire in the Americas. Napoleon's brother Joseph, who had been placed by his brother on the Spanish throne during the recent wars, was living in the United States at the time and was said to have provided some of the money to support Lallemand's expedition.

In December 1817 a group of the exiles boarded the 60-ton schooner Huntress at Philadelphia and set sail for Texas. Crammed aboard the little vessel were 90 French exiles. In addition to the men, their personal gear and supplies for the new colony, the schooner also secretly carried a cargo that gave the lie to the expedition's supposedly peaceful objective: 600 muskets, 400 swords, 12,000 pounds of powder and six pieces of field artillery.

General Lallemand did not accompany them; instead the men found themselves under the command of a newcomer, Lallemand's appointed deputy, General Rigaud. Rigaud would assume effective command of the expedition in the field, and lost no time in organizing the men along the lines of a military unit. No sooner had the Huntress sailed than Rigaud mustered the men and grouped them into three regiments, one each of infantry, cavalry and artillery. The men were assigned to these regiments, or "cohorts," according to their military experience. Since all the men were former officers, the new organization was remarkably top-heavy in "brass." After Rigaud sorted out the retired colonels, majors, surgeons, adjutants and other staff officers, he discovered that there were a total of forty men remaining to form the cohorts. Ten were captains, so the 30 junior officers remaining were divided equally among the cohorts to serve as the "lower ranks."²

The Huntress continued her southward journey, rounded the Florida Keys and sailed westward into the Gulf of Mexico. The schooner had already passed the mouth of the Mississippi when General Rigaud announced that their destination was Galveston Island. The Huntress' master, unfamiliar with the Texas coast, was unwilling to attempt the shoals and sandbars there, but the schooner was soon intercepted by another vessel bearing a Spanish flag. An officer boarded the Huntress and, upon learning the nature of the expedition, identified himself as one of Jean Laffite's captains. His vessel, the Coulouvre, led the Huntress to Galveston and into the harbor, where the Frenchmen disembarked on January 21, 1818 and set up camp to await the arrival of General Lallemand and other recruits.³

The Frenchmen were not impressed with their first visions of Texas. One recalled that, instead of a city and the region that had been pompously described to us, we found only a resolutely desert country. Only three cabins of ten or twelve square feet served as shelter for the corsairs on their return from their trips. Not a single tree; not even any plants except marine life. The land is a dry sand elevated barely two feet above sea level, and it is inundated as deep as two or three feet in bad weather, as we were not long in finding out.⁴

The Frenchmen were no more impressed with Laffite's men than with the terrain. The privateer's men, another expedition member recalled, were freebooters gathered from among all the nations of the earth and determined to put into practice the traditions of the buccaneers of old. They gave themselves up to the most shameless debauchery and disgusting immorality, and only their chief by his extraordinary strength and indomitable resolution had the
slightest control over their wild and savage na-

Charles Lallemand arrived at Galveston with another contingent of men in early March. After an long round of celebrations, the Frenchmen — now joined by a smattering of Spaniards, Italians, Americans and few buccaneers — set out for the Trinity River. They crossed Galveston Bay in boats sold them by Laffite; a winter squall swept over the bay and one of boats was sunk, drowning several men. After 48 hours’ hard rowing, the expedition reached the mouth of the Trinity.

Leaving a handful of men to bring up the boats and supplies by river, Lallemand disembarked his troops and set out overland for the site chosen for the new colony. The men carried only two days’ rations; when these ran out, they tried to eat a lettuce-like plant they found growing in the brush. The men discovered too late that the plant was poisonous, and most soon collapsed with cramps and convulsions. There was no medicine, as the surgeon’s supplies had been left behind with the boats. An Indian happened upon the incapacitated Frenchmen and, divining the cause of their ailment, concocted a remedy from nearby plants. The expedition resumed the march, and arrived at the site of the camp six days after leaving the boats.

After getting lost in the maze of creeks and bayous near the mouth of the Trinity, the boats finally arrived at the site with provisions, but the long-range outlook for the camp’s needs was already bleak. The boats carried only eight days’ worth of food for the colony, and it would take at least two weeks to make the round trip to Galveston to purchase more from Laffite. The men’s rations were reduced to a single biscuit per day, and later to a few ounces of rice.

Short rations notwithstanding, Generals Lallemand and Rigaud immediately set the men to work building a military encampment. The site, located on the left (east) bank of the Trinity, was on a high, clear patch of ground sur-

rounded by groves of trees. Near the north end of the compound, the soldiers constructed two earthen forts, each with a perimeter of about 640 feet, and named them after the Lallemands. Fort Charles guarded the approaches to the camp along the bank of the river, while Fort Henri protected the northeastern edge of the camp. South of Fort Henri, the men cleared a rectangular parade ground and erected small huts or cabins around its perimeter. Along the east side of the parade ground were quartered the first, or infantry, cohort, commanded by Pierre Douarche. Across the south end of the parade ground were quartered the cavalrymen, under the command of Jean Chamasin and (later) Jean Schultz. The third and smallest cohort, that of the artillery, was quartered along the west side of the parade ground, under the command of Fabius Forni. To the west and south stood the generals’ quarters, a crude hospital, guard posts and a row of outbuildings stretching down to the river. They christened the compound Champ d’Asile — “Camp Asylum” — in an effort to reinforce the impression that they were hounded exiles seeking only to start a new life in a new land.

Some accounts claim the colony had as many as 400 inhabitants, but the actual number was smaller. Surviving rolls include the names of 139 men organized into the three cohorts. There were undoubtedly other men not mentioned on the rolls, as well as the senior officers and a handful of women. However, it seems unlikely that there were ever more than 250 people total at Champ d’Asile, and probably fewer. While the large majority were French, a quarter of the expedition’s men were of other nationalities. This was particularly true of the third, or artillery, cohort, a full third of which was comprised of non-French soldiers.

Much of each man’s day at Champ d’Asile was spent in communal building projects, such as Forts Charles and Henri or on the generals’ quarters or outbuildings. A part of each day was also set aside for military drill. The remainder was left for each man to work on building
his own quarters or to otherwise occupy his time. Many men treated the whole enterprise as an extended bivouac, organizing athletic competitions and swapping tales around the campfire late into the night. Few seemed to realize the seriousness of their isolation. The colony was not even remotely self-sufficient. A few men started small garden plots of their own, but these were not enough to supplement the colony's strictly rationed food supply. The men at Champ d'Asile never attempted organized agricultural pursuits in any way. There was no community garden or any real attempt to make the colony self-sustaining; throughout their time in Texas, the men of Champ d'Asile relied on external resources to provide for their needs. Of necessity, this usually meant purchasing supplies from Laffite, who was only too happy to stock the colonists' larder. It seems ironic that this loyal band of Napoleon's soldiers would forget their emperor's most famous maxim, that an army marches on its stomach.

On May 11, 1818, with Forts Charles and Henri quickly taking shape and the soldiers drilling on the parade ground, Charles Lallemand issued a written manifesto announcing the establishment of the colony and giving warning to any power that would challenge it. Though they promised their behavior to be "peaceful, active and industrious," the colonists also warned that "we shall be ready to devote ourselves to the defense of our settlement." "The land we have come to reclaim," the manifesto continued, "will either witness our success or our death."

The Manifesto was widely published in the United States and in Europe. In France it was received with great enthusiasm. There was a great deal of sympathy remaining for the Napoleonic regime, and genuine concern for those Frenchmen living in exile in the United States and elsewhere. The notion of these loyal French soldiers, forced by persecution to establish a new colony in the wilderness, touched the sentiments of the French people. A public subscription was held in Paris, and over a year collected nearly 100,000 francs for support of Champ d'Asile. By that time the colony been abandoned and destroyed, but the expedition remained a popular subject of books, newspapers and pamphlets for months afterward.12

Though their compound was located in an isolated wilderness, there was very little secret about the existence Champ d'Asile. The Frenchmen had frequent contact with the Indians, and boats from the colony made frequent trips to Galveston for supplies and communications. In time word filtered back to Champ d'Asile that a Spanish military force was on its way to crush the invaders and destroy the colony. The force, rumor had it, consisted of 1,200 cavalrymen supported by heavy ordnance. In fact, the Spanish force was much smaller, but its commander was shrewd enough not to reveal that fact too quickly. He camped several days' ride from Champ d'Asile, near enough to be an immediate threat to the colony but so far that it was impossible for Lallemand and Rigaud to obtain firsthand information about the size of the Spanish force. The Frenchmen, chronically short of supplies and weakened by disease and malnutrition, decided to make the prudent choice; they abandoned Champ d'Asile. The Spanish later burned what was left of the compound.13

By early September the Frenchmen had returned to Galveston, where they re-established their camp from the previous winter. In the middle of the month, a hurricane passed over the island, submerging the Frenchmen's camp under several feet of water and devastating Laffite's settlement nearby. The privateer lost the six vessels in the harbor — two brigs, three schooners and a felucca — and all the fresh water supplies on the island were contaminated. What remained of the French filibusters' supplies was lost, and the men's situation became increasingly desperate. Scurvy, dysentery and fever broke out, all made worse by the lack of food. General Lallemand sailed for New Orleans, promising to return in 40 days with fresh supplies and troops. He never came back to Galveston. Under Rigaud morale and discipline
quickly collapsed, and Frenchmen soon scattered, some making their way overland to the United States, while others joined Laffite's privateering crews. A few were able to return to France.\textsuperscript{14}

General Rigaud died in New Orleans in 1820. Henri Lallemand, who had remained in New Orleans throughout the expedition, returned to Philadelphia and died there in 1823. Charles Lallemand eventually returned to Europe, where he participated in several revolutionary movements. He received 100,000 francs in Napoleon's will, and eventually served on the French Council of Peers. He later became military commander of Corsica, the island of Napoleon's birth, and died in Paris in 1839.

Although Champ d'Asile existed for less than five months, it remains one of the most intriguing chapters in American history, and has been recalled in numerous works of history and fiction. C. S. Forester, creator of the famed Horatio Hornblower, even used Champ d'Asile as the model for a fictional Napoleonic colony in Texas in \textit{Admiral Hornblower in the West Indies}. In the story Hornblower, newly installed as the commander of British naval forces in the West Indies in 1821, encounters in New Orleans a famous French general who claims to be preparing to transport the colonists back to France. Hornblower suspects otherwise, and discovers that the general's real intention is to rescue Napoleon from exile at St. Helena. Hornblower is forced to risk everything to thwart the general's plans and prevent the resumption of the recent war. But that's a different story. . . .

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 351.
\item Ibid., 352; Reeves, 81.
\item Dabbs, 352.
\item Dabbs, 353.
\item Reeves, 83-84.
\item Dabbs, 354.
\item Ibid., 265.
\item Reeves, 85-86.
\item Ibid., 87-88.
\item Ibid., 91; Dabbs, 355; Ratchford, 21-22.
\item Ratchford, 22-23; Dabbs, 355.
\end{enumerate}