HISTORICAL COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS
ON THE MAP “BAHIA DE GALVESTON”

Editor’s Note: the following article is an abstract of the presentation given by Tom Oertling at the general meeting of The Laflite Society held on Monday, November 13, 1995. Mr. Oertling, who provided the abstract, is a member of the Society and has expertise in the field of nautical archaeology. The map which formed the focus of the presentation, its legends in Spanish, and their translations into English, were employed as visual aids during the presentation, and are reproduced in this article. The translation was provided by Dorothy Karilanovic.

The map “Bahia de Galveston” can give us important information, not only on the geography of Galveston Bay in the early nineteenth century, but also on how it was perceived by those who explored it. The map itself fits in with the “filibuster period” of Texas, as will be seen below.

There are several clues of an historical nature that can be investigated through the historical record. The first is legend #3: “Bocas del Rio la Trinidad,” etc. There are the names Orocuisas and St. Augustine de Aumada. The Orocuisa Indians were an Attacapan tribe living on the north side of Galveston Bay along the Trinity and Colorado Rivers. From time to time this tribe was associated with the Bidai, Aranama and other tribes. In 1756 the Spanish built the Presidio of San Agustin de Ahumada as an outpost against French incursions by French traders. At the same time, the Mission of Nuestra Señora de la Luz was established. Fifty families of Tascalan Indians were transplanted from southern Mexico with the idea that these Indians would teach the Orocuisa how to adapt to mission life.

The San Agustin de Ahumada Presidio, also known as El Orocuisae, replaced a temporary garrison sent to El Orocuisae after a French trader was arrested in the area. The Presidio was named in honor of the viceroy of New Spain and was located, according to the viceroy’s orders, on the exact spot of the arrest of the Frenchman. The site, near a lagoon, was ordered moved on several occasions, but because of the procrastination of first civil authorities and then the priests attached to the mission, the move was never effected. The site has been identified as being near Wallisville, in Chambers County.

The buildings of the Presidio were damaged in a storm in 1766 and the site was moved to higher ground a short distance away. In June of 1770, part of the garrison left the fort for Bexar to aid in a campaign against the Apache. By February, 1771, only three soldiers and two priests remained at the site. A few weeks later these five abandoned the Presidio and mission. San Agustin de Ahumada was officially discontinued in 1772. In 1805, a short distance below this site, the Spanish established a port, also called Orocuisae, which operated only for a short time.

The next historical clue is in legend #10: “Tierra llana 3 pies arriva del nivel de la marea a donde campaba el Gn Humbert con sus tropas.” Jean Robert Marie Humbert was one of the many colorful characters who inhabited New Orleans, many of whom nurtured a passion to find fame and fortune in Texas in the name of Mexican independence. Humbert was born in Rouvray, Lorraine, on November 25, 1775, of peasant stock. He enlisted in the Army of the Rhine at an early age and quickly rose in rank to become a Major General in 1794. Humbert’s attack on Landau was lauded as “one of the boldest feats of arms ever recorded.”

Because of his record, he was appointed to command the French invasion of Ireland in 1798. The expedition was a failure and many of the Irish peasants were slaughtered. Humbert surrendered to Lord Cornwallis at Ballymuck and was exchanged for British prisoners shortly after. His next command was with the Army of the Danube in 1799 where he was seriously wounded.

Two years later, another ill-fated episode in
his career began. Under the direction of Leclerc, Bonaparte’s brother-in-law, he was sent to Santo Domingo/Haiti, in command of one third of the French forces, to quell the slave revolt led by Toussaint L’Overture. When he arrived, the country was in turmoil. The negroes had ransacked the countryside, looting and burning the plantations. The French soldiers fell victim, not to the revolting slaves, but to yellow fever. Leclerc died and the French met with defeat at every turn. Napoleon had to recall his army.

Humbert’s actions at this point were to presage some of his antics in Louisiana. He took Leclerc’s widow - Napoleon’s sister - Pauline Bonaparte, as his mistress. His actions plus his Republican ideology caused an open rift with Bonaparte. Humbert was exiled to Brittany, where he gave full vent to his anger and was arrested for sedition. He escaped to the United States, arriving in Philadelphia in 1813. He still had grandiose plans of campaign and glory. In Washington he stated that he could conquer Canada for the United States with only the help of Irish troops that he could raise himself. He also offered to establish a military academy. The U.S. officials would not receive him, but suggested that he should go to Texas or Cartagena. After a month in Philadelphia, he took ship with other French and Spanish officers for New Orleans. Once there, Humbert decided to attach himself to the cause of José Alvarez de Toledo, despite the fact that Toledo did not want him! Toledo had just suffered a crushing defeat in Texas and was now in Tennessee.

By the fall of 1813, Humbert was again making claims that he could raise 1,500 troops and invade Texas in Toledo’s name, but Toledo wrote an associate in New Orleans claiming no association with the General and that he should desist in using his name. It was at this point that Humbert became involved with the Lafitte brothers, whereby the Baratarians would lead a naval expedition to Matagorda or Tampico at the same time that Humbert led his troops from Nacogdoches. These plans, like so many others, failed to materialize.

In the summer of 1814, Humbert was involved in yet another intrigue. He arrived in Nautla, Mexico, with Dominique You, with a cargo of gunpowder. Humbert started making claims that he was there as a representative of the United States (which he was not) and was empowered to negotiate with the revolutionaries for an alliance. This caused the different factions within the movement to become more estranged and did great damage to the cause of Mexican independence. By this time the General had acquired a reputation for being somewhat loco.

More pressing events for New Orleans and the United States eclipsed those of Texas filibustering operations as the war between the U.S. and Britain was coming to a head in this area. General Pakenham, at the head of a British army, had made offers to Lafitte to join the British against Jackson’s forces defending New Orleans. For fear of this and also in response to Lafitte’s continued violations of the revenue laws, a combined U.S. army and naval force was sent to dislodge Lafitte and his men from Barataria. The Battle of New Orleans occurred on January 8, 1815, and General Humbert, along with the Lafittes and the Baratarians, took a part in it.

Humbert next became involved with Don José Manuel de Herrera, who had credentials as a representative from the revolutionary government of Mexico to the United States. By this time, Toledo was also involved again (Sword, p. 127).

In 1815, General Humbert left New Orleans with fifty men to join Colonel Henry Perry (Sword, p. 130). Perry had been involved with the cause of Mexican independence for several years and was at the time of this expedition under indictment from the federal courts in New Orleans, along with several others, for violations of the neutrality of the United States. Perry left his base in Vermilion Bay, Louisiana, in September, 1815, and arrived on Bolivar Peninsula, the name given by Perry. A camp was set up here and they waited for additional supplies and men. However, two of the vessels bringing these were wrecked in the channel and, faced with these discouragements and declining conditions, the expedition was abandoned. In February of 1816, Perry, Humbert and the men they commanded returned to New Orleans.

Humbert was on Bolivar in 1816, not 1810. A careful examination of the photostat copy shows that the apparent zero of the “1810” is very
much lower case. It can be assumed that the numeral is “6” with its upper part faded.

The questions now arise, “For whom was the map made, and why?”

After the failure of the Perry expedition, Herrera tried again, allying himself with Don Louis Aury, a distinguished naval officer who was Commodore of the fleet of the Republics of Venezuela, La Plata and New Granada. Herrera appointed him Commodore of the Navy of Mexico and sent him to take possession of Galveston. Aury arrived in Galveston Bay on September 1, 1816, in command of twelve to fifteen small vessels. At that time there were only three or four small cabins, made of boards and ships’ sails. There can be little doubt that one of the members of the Perry expedition, probably an American or a Frenchman, had made the map for Aury’s benefit.

Every map has a purpose, an intent to show information beyond simple geography. This one is no different. Although the course and bearing for the main channel into Galveston are marked, along with places of anchorage and the small boat route down to the Bay of San Bernardo (#20), this map is mainly concerned with the land. There are many notes on the type of land: marshy, swampy, firm land, mud flats. Of particular note is the comment (#11) that the beach on Bolivar is “firm beach where one can go by horse.” There is a spot on the west side of the Bay (#25) where there is an “excellent position for a watchtower and fort.” There is a new road twenty miles from the mouth of the San Jacinto River, which itself is navigable for twelve miles through beautiful country with sweet water (#’s 29 and 30).

This map seems specifically intended for military uses. The spot for a fort on the mainland is obvious; the beach on Bolivar is firm enough for a rider to communicate at least to the Sabine. The type of ground is, of course, of great importance to an army on foot, as is the presence of good land (off which an army can live) and sweet water.

A copy of this map is in the cartographic collection at the Texas History Center at Rosenberg Library, Galveston (reference number 204). The copy there is a photostat of a manuscript map in the National Archives in Mexico City. Among other things, the comments on the map state, “Jean Joseph Humbert was associated with José Alvarez de Toledo and Perry in filibustering efforts against Mexico. Aury probably named the area ‘Bolivar Point’ in honor of Simon Bolivar, from whom he held a commission.” It also says that the area that is now Fort Point was separated from Galveston Island by a five- to six-foot channel, and that it was this island that was named “Little Campeche,” not Lafitte’s town. This channel was also the best way to get a small boat into Galveston Harbor.

This map is of great importance to those interested in Jean Lafitte, because it is the best detailed map from a period closest to the time when Lafitte occupied Galveston Island.

Footnotes
2) Ibid., pp. 294, 539.
3) Ibid., pp. 294, 317, 539.
9) Ibid., pp. 18-19.