

Bonapartists in the Borderlands: French Exiles and Refugees on the Gulf Coast, 1815–1835. *By Rafe Blaufarb*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. xix + 302 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, appendix, figures, illustrations, tables. Cloth, \$50.00. ISBN: 0-817-31487-3.

Reviewed by Benjamin F. Martin

French immigration to the United States has been limited. During the first wave, in the seventeenth century, the Creoles came to Louisiana and the Huguenots arrived in South Carolina. Then, in the mid-eighteenth century, the Acadians fled to Louisiana after the British conquest of Canada. Finally, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, exiles from Napoleon Bonaparte's defeated empire (1814–15) and refugees from the slave revolt (1791–1801) on Saint-Domingue (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic) set foot on the Gulf Coast. The fate of that third contingent is the basis of this wide-ranging book.

The War of 1812 alerted American leaders to vulnerabilities in the Southeast. Great Britain's strategy went far beyond staging assaults up the Mississippi River, as it included using the Spanish colonies of Florida and Texas as a base from which to enlist Indians and escaped slaves to mount attacks. Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814 scuttled these plans, but the possibility of their revival still remained. For good reason, the French expatriates passionately despised the British and could be counted on to shore up the area's defenses. By happy coincidence, they themselves sought to form a community and were thus persuaded to settle at the confluence of the Tombigbee and Black Warrior Rivers in what would become the state of Alabama.

There, within reach of Mobile Bay and not too far from New Orleans and the trading posts in Tennessee, the immigrants cultivated wine grapes and olive trees on an area covering four townships that totaled 144 square miles and amounted to slightly more than 92,000 acres. Congress approved a cession of lands conquered earlier from the Creek Indians, and President James Madison signed the bill on March 3, 1817.

Of course, the legislators were interested in more than wine and oil. Led by the wily Francophile Henry Clay, they viewed the "Vine and Olive Colony" as an instrument

of Manifest Destiny because it would immediately establish an overland connection between the settled regions of the trans-Appalachians and Louisiana. Longer term, a substantial American population on the middle Gulf Coast would force Spain to sell Florida to the United States or risk losing it through the sheer weight of demography. If successful, they thought, the colony might also become the vanguard of American claims further west, stretching toward Texas, where Spain was the dominant presence.

And, of course, some of the French expatriates, foremost among them Charles François Antoine Lallemand, were also interested in more than wine and oil. A soldier from the age of seventeen who, in the best tradition of French Revolutionary *égalité*, rose from the enlisted ranks to become one of Bonaparte's storied generals, Lallemand, in 1817, was only forty-three and still hungry for glory. With his brother, Henri Domingue Lallemand, and another Napoleonic general, Antoine Rigau, he devised an audacious plan to overthrow Spanish rule in the Southwest. His first step was to create an armed encampment in east Texas from which to advance against Mexico, possibly with the intent of placing Joseph Bonaparte, the only member of Napoleon's family to reach the New World, on that country's throne. This adventure, known as the "Champ d'Asile" (Field of Asylum), foundered on difficulties of transportation and logistics and was probably unfeasible from the beginning. Yet it was no more outlandish than many another conspiracy hatched during this period—recall Aaron Burr's scheme to form a republic in the Southwest.

The great majority of the French settlers in the Vine and Olive Colony suffered through the rigors of clearing heavily forested land, adjusting to the wilderness, and enduring intense heat and swarms of mosquitoes. The exiles from France soon grew weary and sold their portions. The refugees from Saint Domingue persevered. Vines never grew well in Alabama, and olive trees could not survive the winters, but cotton flourished, as it did in the rest of the Deep South, and made some of them rich. Eventually, through intermarriage, these French families became indistinguishable from the Anglo-Saxon farmers and planters who arrived in Alabama only a few years later.

If the Vine and Olive Colony has traditionally been remembered as a brief romantic interlude during which French aristocrats brought elegance to Alabama before succumbing to the rigors of riverine pine forests, Blaufarb demonstrates that it also had

an impact on colonial history. The difficulties of chartering land to a group convinced Congress never again to attempt such a collective settlement. The conquest of the frontier was left to individuals, and the philosophy of rugged individualism won the day, with important consequences for the American psyche.

Although a failure, Lallemand's Champ d'Asile alerted leaders in both Washington and Mexico City to the risks posed by freebooters in contested territory, prodding the United States and Mexico to negotiate the Transcontinental Treaty, which established a firm boundary between the two countries.

Blaufarb's account of these "Bonapartists in the Borderlands" is an excellent example of a historical monograph. He has consulted the relevant archival sources in Paris, Nantes, Seville, Madrid, London, Mexico City, Washington, D.C., and in ten states. He has explored and analyzed the major elements of the story and has traced others that are merely tangential. For all practical purposes, this study is definitive. Unfortunately, as so often occurs in monographs, only the seriously interested are likely to tackle Blaufarb's dense, often tedious, writing style in order to read this fine work of scholarship.

Benjamin F. Martin is professor of history at Louisiana State University. The most recent of his five books is France in 1938 (2005), which was a History Book Club Selection. His current project is "The Tax Man Cometh: The Imposition of the Income Tax in the Western Democracies."