

---

*H-France Review* Vol. 13 (February 2013), No. 25

Eric Saugera, *Reborn in America: French Exiles and Refugees in the United States and the Vine and Olive Adventure*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011. xii + 572 pp. Maps, tables, notes, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$30.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8173-1723-2.

Review by R. Darrell Meadows, Kentucky Historical Society.

In this most recent addition to the “Atlantic Crossings” series of the University Press of Alabama, edited by Rafe Blaufarb, Eric Saugera presents a deeply-researched history of the famed Vine and Olive Adventure that challenges longstanding historical memory and provides an important jumping off point for further research. Presenting his work in sixteen chapters organized into five parts, Saugera seeks to supplement and modify the work Blaufarb and Emilio Ocampo provided in their respective *Bonapartists in the Borderlands: French Exiles and Refugees on the Gulf Coast, 1815-1835* (2005) and *The Emperor’s Last Campaign: A Napoleonic Empire in America* (2009). Drawing on French municipal and departmental archives, records of the French Foreign Ministry, army and naval records, diplomatic archives, national archives in Paris, London and the United States, as well as repositories in Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana and Pennsylvania, Saugera recounts the founding of the Colonial Society of French Emigrants and its basis in a complicated history of enlightened agricultural experimentation, economic survival, land speculation, and exile politics. A historian of French slavery whose important first book focused on Bordeaux and the slave trade, Saugera here captures a long-misunderstood episode in the broader context of a chaotic Atlantic world still undergoing significant reconfiguration in the decade or so after Waterloo.[1]

Early chapters set the stage by recounting the effort of the restored Bourbon regime to name enemies and hunt down the “chief culprits” of the failed Hundred Days. While most of Saugera’s discussion focuses on the proscription of important military figures who would later be involved in the Vine and Olive colony—most notably General Lallemand (the elder)—we also learn of a few lesser-known exiles, such as Jacques Lajonie, who fled charges of murder in the midst of the White Terror. Lajonie came from a solid bourgeois family in winegrowing southwestern France (his father had been mayor of the village of Gensac in the Dordogne valley), and like most of the men who founded the Vine and Olive colony, Lajonie left his wife and children behind during his exile. Saugera makes ample use of Lajonie’s extant correspondence for the years 1816-1829, which provides a useful point of comparison around which to frame an otherwise unwieldy cast of characters. Lajonie’s case is a stark contrast to the minority of military and civilian French exiles who invested in but either never made it to the colony or left within three years of the colony’s founding in 1816-17 along the Tombigbee River in what is now western Alabama.

To help explain why the idea for this agricultural settlement emerged as it did, Saugera points to the little-known, though longstanding history of viticultural experimentation in North America, beginning with a twenty-year experiment at New Bordeaux, South Carolina, led by Protestant Pastor Jean Louis Gibert and then Dumesnil de Saint-Pierre, which only ended with the coming of the American Revolutionary War. A second experiment took place near Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, where his neighbor and winegrower Philip Mazzei proved an important influence even before Jefferson left for France. Both he and Washington enjoyed Mazzei’s wines, and invested in his company. More

---

ambitiously, French émigré Pierre Legaux founded the Vine Company of Pennsylvania along the Schuylkill River northwest of Philadelphia, securing numerous Anglo-American investors, including Benjamin Rush, Aaron Burr, and Alexander Hamilton. As American expansion into the Ohio valley proceeded in the decades before and after 1800, Swiss immigrant Jean Jacques Dufour, at the invitation of Kentucky politician John Brown, conducted winegrowing experiments near Lexington, then successfully petitioned Congress (with the help of Senator Brown) for a land grant to establish a winegrowing settlement in Indiana. Dufour's New Switzerland employed winegrowing families from the Vaud region of Switzerland, and by 1806-7 it was selling its wines, wheat and fruits in the Louisville, St. Louis and Cincinnati markets. By the 1820s, however, Dufour had successfully learned an important lesson that would be lost on the founders of the Vine and Olive settlement—Americans preferred their alcohol in the form of whiskey.

While the colony did indeed have roots in viticultural interests, its founding was not the work of military exiles. As Saugera deftly shows, military men became involved with the colony only after its initial goals and organization had been set. The Vine and Olive settlement was more likely the brainchild of Saint-Domingue refugee Jean Simon Chaudron (editor of the *Abeille Américaine* in Philadelphia). Indeed, Saint-Domingue refugees, many of whom had been in the United States since 1791-93 and eagerly sought a way to establish themselves more permanently, provided much of the impetus for the colony. Saugera suggests that historians have overlooked this fact not only because of faulty historical memory but because the refugees strategically preferred to remain in the background. Allowing more recent exiles to front the Colonial Society of French Emigrants, they believed, would garner greater sympathy for their plans. Nonetheless, among the key figures in this complicated network of exile and refugee relations was the regicide Joseph Lakanal—Saugera calls him the guiding spirit of the group—who had established a plantation on the Ohio in northern Kentucky, and who, along with fellow *conventionnel* Jean Augustin Pénrières-Delzors trekked westward into Missouri and then through Mississippi valley lands occupied by the Osage, Chickasaws, Delawares, and Cherokees, in search of a suitable site for their colony. Meanwhile, members of the Colonial Society of French Emigrants in Philadelphia prepared to petition Congress. The petition effort proved successful, and Congress granted 92,000 acres with special provisions intended to encourage settlers to engage in at least a minimum level of wine and olive growing.

Saugera's painstaking research counters Ocampo's assertion that the establishment of a Bonapartist empire in South America via Mexico was the Society's underlying motivation. Saugera admits, for example, that many of the Bonapartists had made contact with leaders of the various independence movements and that exchanges between Grouchy and Carrera in Mexico in summer 1816, for example, resulted in tangible support. But Saugera's reading of the evidence indicates that most of the exiles were unwilling to risk their position in the United States or the possibility of returning to France (p. 169). Likewise, Saugera sees no evidence for the direct causal link Blaufarb made between the United States' land grant to the emigrants and its desire to enhance its military position vis-à-vis the Spanish in an expanding frontier that stretched from Florida to Texas. Indeed, it was Lakanal (who was not a military expert, but did have some experience with viticulture) who selected the general area based on the agricultural needs of this particular French colony. The locations of the four townships would be selected by colonists, not by American officials.

In short, Saugera demonstrates that military men did not play a central role in the enterprise. Officers made up only one-fifth of the society, and few of these had any role in the planning, organization, and congressional lobbying. Rather, it was Saint-Domingue refugees, in addition to Lakanal, Desnoëttes, and the younger Lallemand, who played the defining role, and these men always focused on the colony's commercial, agricultural, and manufacturing possibilities. Furthermore, workers recruited in winegrowing France were selected for their particular skills, and French exiles quickly disappeared from diplomatic correspondence, both indications that military defense was neither a key factor in granting these lands nor a key purpose of the colony. The entire thrust of the original petition to

Congress, whose signatories were nearly all civilians, was economic in nature. With the failed Scioto settlement on everyone's mind, the congressional law assumed this was a risky agricultural endeavor and included provisions to prevent speculation. It was only after the arrival of the elder Lallemand and several other officers that the goals of the society began to be diverted. In short, Saugera argues, "The society relied on ordinary people, enlisted men, merchants, artisans, and former Dominguan colonists" (p. 196).

Saugera reveals the often close trans-Atlantic ties that existed among many of the exiles, ties borne out of years of collaboration in a variety of milieux: military leadership, plantation society, revolutionary and imperial politics, family connections, as well as years of forced exile. These were significant networks of trust that help explain why individuals like Jacques Lajonie would readily take the advice of a General Bernard, who spoke highly of the prospect for new life in Alabama. After arriving in New Orleans, Lajonie established contacts there and at Mobile. In a pattern that repeated itself among the French and Saint-Domingue exiles in the United States, Lajonie quickly found a trusted business partner in Jean Quessart, a Saint-Domingue refugee and native of Libourne, just west of Lajonie's birthplace of Gensac. Quessart was among the nearly 10,000 Saint-Domingue refugees expelled from Cuba in 1809 who made their way to New Orleans. He, like many others, maintained ties to Bordeaux merchants and acquired forty acres of the Tombigbee grant. In 1817, Lajonie also secured eight French indentured laborers skilled in the textiles, woodworking, and iron trades, all of them working-age male Protestants recruited from the close-knit towns along the Dordogne River in eastern Gironde.

Digging deeply into records of the settlement's brief early history, Saugera shows why the colony failed, beginning with a delayed government land survey that revealed an error in the initial siting of the settlement and resulted in months of wasted effort and disillusionment (administrative and judicial boundaries in Alabama would not be completed until 1823). Too few of the initial French subscribers ever attempted to settle, and of those who did, too few had agricultural experience. Moreover, the lands along the Tombigbee were in the Black or "Cotton" Belt, not particularly well suited for wine or olive production—an important stipulation underlying the grant. Many quickly sold out and moved on. Despite multiple failures, Lajonie hung on longer than most. Attempting to become a merchant, he misjudged markets and learned the realities of trade and import duties the hard way. Eventually he would add cotton growing to his diverse activities. He even believed his native region of the Gironde ought to follow the lead of Normandy and seek industrial growth through the establishment of cotton factories. He did not exactly return to France empty-handed, but neither did he return with a fortune.

The book's final section presents a declining French population along the Tombigbee, and the dwindling choices exiles faced. Yet, as colonists moved on, the more successful expanded their networks across the burgeoning American South and formed new ties to Cuba. In the years before the American Civil War, Saugera finds former members in Louisville, Baton Rouge, Natchez, New Orleans, as well as in Missouri—all proslavery supporters of secession in the Civil War. Building on Blaufarb's findings, Saugera shows that many of these colonists did remain, integrate, and find success elsewhere in the United States. The final chapter recounts the stories of selected returnees to France—primarily major figures such as the generals Vandamme (1819), Grouchy (1820), Clauzel (who returned in 1829, after which he advocated for French involvement in Algeria), or other military figures, like Nicolas Raoul, who served in Central America before returning to France in 1833, or the exile Lajonie, who returned to Gensac in 1829 to become an important *notable* within his canton.

The primary significance of Saugera's account thus lies in the light it sheds on the colony's founding. However, *Reborn in America*—alongside the work of Blaufarb and Ocampo—also suggests new opportunities to situate the Colonial Society of French Emigrants, especially those Saint-Domingue refugees who did settle and who found some level of success in the United States. Indeed, if there is one glaring omission in Saugera's otherwise superb account, it is the general absence of detailed discussion of Saint-Domingue refugees—despite the book's title and evidence of the Dominguan's role in the

colony's founding, as well as their relative persistence and growing integration (often through intermarriage) with Anglo-Americans. It is especially unfortunate, in this respect, that Saugera's account does not really go any further than Blaufarb's earlier work.<sup>[2]</sup> An expanded understanding of the Vine and Olive Adventure's significance would, at a minimum, see the role of the Saint-Domingue refugees as another important (and not particularly distant) reverberation of the Haitian Revolution.<sup>[3]</sup>

As a contribution to Atlantic history, *Born in America* fails to contextualize fully the history of the Colonial Society of French Emigrants as part and parcel to American colonization of the south and southwest at a critical early moment in the expansion of plantation slavery. Doing so could revise our understanding of both.<sup>[4]</sup> By 1816-17, the expansion of cotton farming was not new. Saugera might have probed further the illuminating point made by Blaufarb, namely that a number of the French emigrant colonists, Domingians especially, subscribed to the venture precisely because it was their opportunity to move into cotton production. Did their presence on the Tombigbee have any impact on the development or extension of "French" traders or trade with France (whether operating out of Philadelphia or Bordeaux, for example) at Mobile or New Orleans? We know that the Domingians were eager to purchase slaves, but had difficulty doing so. But were solutions found that led to heightened trade in slaves to the area—whether overland or by ship?<sup>[5]</sup> How might a more focused examination of the Domingians in the group expand our understanding about the persistence of French communities in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys through the antebellum era and into the Civil War?<sup>[6]</sup> Finally, could a deeper investigation into the persistence and integration of these Saint-Domingue refugees in Alabama and other parts of this expanded American South provide the missing link—or, more appropriately, the "living memory"—that gave actual voice to a particular racialized proslavery narrative that, as Edward Rugemer has shown, was forged in print early in the Haitian Revolution, and became an animating force in Southern proslavery ideology throughout the antebellum period and Civil War?<sup>[7]</sup> Atlantic history of this sort is particularly challenging because it requires historians to engage a wider historiography.

Nonetheless, having swept myth and romanticism from our historical field of vision, Saugera has opened the way for the discovery of additional French Atlantic truths—no small feat. *Reborn in America* has much to offer students of the French Atlantic world, the international context of early national U.S. history, American expansion, and the long shadow of the Haitian Revolution.

## NOTES

[1] Eric Saugera, *Bordeaux, Port négrier: Chronologie, économie, idéologie, XVIIe-XIXe siècles* (Biarritz and Paris: J & D éditions ; Karthala, 1995).

[2] Rafe Blaufarb, *Bonapartists in the Borderlands: French Exiles and Refugees on the Gulf Coast, 1815-1835* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005).

[3] David Barry Gaspar and David Patrick Geggus, eds., *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); David Patrick Geggus, ed., *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 2001). To date, Ashli White has done the best job of anyone to demonstrate how the influx of this highly diverse Caribbean population into the U.S. had a deep and lasting impact on the direction of early national politics and society. *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

[4] See especially Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005); and James David Miller, *South by Southwest: Planter Emigration and Identity in the Slave South* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).

[5] See, for example, Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003); and Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

[6] Jay Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion*. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2010).

[7] Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

R. Darrell Meadows

Kentucky Historical Society

[darrell.meadows@ky.gov](mailto:darrell.meadows@ky.gov)

Copyright © 2013 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172