Who's Buried in Napoleon's Grave?

Story by Jim Bradshaw

Here and there, on old tombstones in south Louisiana, you will find the inscription "Soldat de Napoleon, Soldier of Napoleon." The men buried here, like the Acadians before them, were exiles who found a new home in a Louisiana still French in flavor and fervor, even if it no longer flew the fleur de lis.

Louisiana had achieved statehood by the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the emperor's final exile to the rugged Atlantic Island of St. Helena. His once mighty Grande Armée then lay in disarray. Many of his soldiers feared for their lives and welfare in France. Just ten days after Waterloo, on June 28, 1815, King Louis XVIII proclaimed that he would extend a pardon to "the insurgents of that horrible plot" that had returned Napoleon from his first exile on Elba and restored him to power.

The king would extend an amnesty to the soldiers the next January, but it excluded high ranking officers and Napoleon's relatives. And King Louis kept the right to exile other suspects, and to take away property and pension. Thousands of soldiers who had served under Napoleon were drummed out of the country. Those who had come to Louisiana had become a still mostly Bonapartist, French was the preferred tongue. French customs were still faithfully observed, and some of their fellow Louisiana had already found homes.

One of those Bonapartists who had come early to Louisiana was Louis Joseph Paul Antoine Girgues de Flaugue. According to the inscription on his tomb in the St. Landry Cemetery in Opelousas, he was "a virtuous and enlightened legislator and died regretted by all good citizens." He was an aristocrat from southern France and an officer in Napoleon's early campaigns, one of the first Louisiana legislators, and a hero of the Battle of New Orleans.

Garrigues de Flaugue was born in 1780. His father, once a bodyguard at the court of King Louis XVI of France, always wanted his son to be a soldier. He would be, but not in the service of the King. The French Revolution took care of that. Instead, when he was 17, he joined Bonaparte's army.

As a young soldier in the Dragoons Corps, de Flaugue took part in the Italian campaign, which was crowned by a victory at Marengo in June, 1800. Next he would serve in the 1st Division of the 3rd Army, under Napoleon himself.

But then he was captured by the British and sent to a Cuban jail, where, according to one biographer, "his word of honor not to escape kept him more secure than any other man." He was freed and returned to the French army, but his health was broken. He returned to France in 1804, where he was given a pension and retired from the army.

On September 1, 1814, the United States declared war on France. The American forces were commanded by General Andrew Jackson, who had a reputation for being a hard-fought battle.

In December 1814, a messenger arrived with the news that Napoleon had returned to France and was planning to invade the United States. The American forces were on high alert, and General Jackson ordered a full mobilization of his troops.

Garrigues de Flaugue was one of the generals who led the American forces in the Battle of New Orleans. His troops were well-trained and well-equipped, and they fought with great courage.

In the end, the American forces were victorious, and the war was over. Garrigues de Flaugue was one of the leaders of the American forces, and he is remembered as a great hero of the American Revolution.

Mary Perrin claimed that Napoleon was buried in her family plot on the property near the town of Laffitte.

"four contiguous townships, each six miles square, on vacant public lands... in the Mississippi Territory... near the junction of the Black Warrior and Tombigbee rivers."

The settlers were lighthearted at first. Wives unpacked dainty dresses without the faintest idea of what pioneer life meant. Wooden cabins were built while a city was being designed. The men hunted, fished, and planned the vineyards and olive orchards they had come to plant.

The first shock was to learn that they had begun building their city, Demopolis, in the wrong place—outside the government grant. They salvaged bricks and beams and began building anew.

They named the second capital Aigleville, for the eagle that had been the symbol of Napoleon's troops. But the second shock came when these lifeless soldiers came to realize that they knew little about growing grapes or olives. Planter imported from France arrived more dead than alive. The space allotted to them in Marengo County (named for the battle) was too low. Springs were scarce. Sliant pools left by overflowing streams bred mosquitoes and malaria.

When a group of German immigrants appeared, they were welcomed. They did what the French had done, and before long the soldiers were selling their lands to the new immigrants and moving on. In other words, the veterans, tired of waiting for payment, seized the land.

Other Napoléonic exiles, led by General Charles Lallemand, tried Texas. Lallemand asked the Spanish government's permission to settle his "army" or Champ d'Asile on the banks of the Trinity River.

The Spanish did not answer. Lallemand took the silence to mean consent, and led a group from Philadelphia to settle about 70 miles above the mouth of the Trinity River. They promptly left for New Orleans to gather supplies and more settlers.

It was a beautiful place, a fine homesite, but, from reville to curl, Lallemand had kept the veterans from making any improvements. They had only come to activate the land. They began to wonder what they were up to.

In New Orleans, both his intention and his construction were into question. He bought colorful glass trinkets to give to the Indians, but they were in "the language of the Texas natives." But, less openly, he also ne...
And what of the Emperor himself?

About 20 miles south of New Orleans, near the town of Lafitte, there is an old burying ground on a high point of land where the Bayou des Isles (Goose Bayou) flows into Bayou Lafitte. Here one may still find three old, sunken graves, one of them marked by an iron cross. The legend is that the crypt contains Napoleon's grave.

His old soldiers had made plans to rescue him from St. Helena and bring him to Louisiana, Nicholas Bonaparte, Napoleon's son, set out from Paris in 1811 to 1816, prepared Napoleon House on Chartres Street for the exiled emperor to live in after his rescue. Captain J. S. Bostiere was to build, equip and command the ship that was to fetch Napoleon. He had a local shipyard build a clipper, named the Seraphine, and recruited a crew of old pirates to man it. But three days before the day in 1816 set for the Seraphine's departure, news reached New Orleans that Napoleon had died on St. Helena by Jean Lafitte, who (she claimed) was his cousin, and that Lafitte had buried Napoleon's body on St. Helena.

She said Napoleon actually died at sea during the voyage to New Orleans and was buried in this lonely grave.

She also claimed that another cousin, John Paul Jones, bore peace after America's victory at Lake Erie and finally died aboard one of his own privateers.

He, too, was brought here to be buried. Lafitte, she claimed, was killed in a fight with a British ship in the Gulf of Mexico. Before dying he had given orders that his body be sent home and placed with his two cousins.

Mary Perrin is dead now, and nobody ever really believes her story, of course. But even when she was alive, the story was hard to believe.

Benoit Bayard, who was born in St. Martinville, claimed to have saved Napoleon's life by putting out the wick of a cannon aimed at the Emperor and having himself given the title of Baron, which he would pass on to his descendants. When someone objected that America did not recognize his rank, he didn't bother him. He baptized his sons Hylolite Baron Bayard and Alfred Napoleon Bayard at St. Martinville and declared that Napoleon was born in Louisiana.

Brevet General and Senator Antoine Garrigues de Flaugueac of Opeouas died in June, 1845.