

The East Florida Coffee Land Expedition of 1821: Plantations or a Bonapartist Kingdom of the Indies?

by Canter Brown, Jr.

In the United States of the Revolutionary and Federal eras, large communities of Frenchmen provided a refuge for thousands of exiles from Revolutionary, Bonapartist and Bourbon France, as well as from the strife-torn colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti). Located particularly in the vicinities of Philadelphia and of Charleston, South Carolina, the communities made significant contributions to “the fabric of American society” during the first half-century of the nation’s existence.¹ Characteristically, as governments in France or Saint-Domingue rose and fell during the period, many residents of these communities returned home, while a new wave of exiles—supporters of the newly deposed regime—arrived in the United States. The immigrants might be merchants, craftsmen, teachers, impoverished planters, or luminaries of the magnitude of Joseph Bonaparte, the former king of Spain.² Some of the exiles intended to settle permanently near existent French communities, while others dreamed of recouping lost fortunes through “various land and commercial schemes” or else through international intrigues.³

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In the late 1810s and early 1820s an opportunity was presented to members of the Philadelphia-area French community to regain their fortunes through the largess of the United States Congress. The ultimate goal of the ensuing enterprise, the East Florida Coffee Land Association, merely may have been the establishment of coffee plantations in South Florida. Possibly, though, it may have involved far greater potentialities, including the restoration of white rule in Saint-Domingue and the eventual creation of a Bonapartist kingdom of the Indies.

The origins of the East Florida Coffee Land Association are traceable to February 22, 1819, when representatives of the king of Spain agreed at Washington to the cession of Spanish Florida to the United States.⁴ However, the resulting Adams-Onís Treaty, which formalized the transfer, was not ratified immediately, and, in the following two years, the pact proved controversial. Virginia Congressman John Randolph, reflecting the sentiments of many, argued in the House of Representatives: "Florida, sir, is not worth buying. It is a land of swamps, of quagmires, of frogs and alligators and mosquitoes! A man, sir, would not immigrate into Florida—no, not from hell itself!"⁵ Contrary to Randolph's assertions, though, a number of entrepreneurs, some of them French, were intent upon exploiting the opportunities presented by the purchase of Florida, and Peter Stephen Chazotte, among them, had made known his intentions to the Congress.

Chazotte was about 50 years old in 1821.⁶ In the 1790s he had cultivated coffee and cocoa on family plantations in Saint-Domingue, but the outbreak of a black revolution had compelled him to flee in 1798 to Charleston, South Carolina.⁷ Chazotte remained in the United States for two years awaiting, as he later wrote, "a return of a tolerable state of peace." That desirable circumstance was achieved in Chazotte's opinion in 1800, and late in the year he returned to the colony. First, however, he sought to protect himself from the animosities of former slaves toward French masters by accepting U. S. citizenship.⁸

Indeed, Chazotte's precaution did save his life. First, while he was serving as an officer in French counter-revolutionary forces, his plantations were seized and much of his property destroyed. Then, at the request of "a deputation from the colored and freed black men of my district," he engaged in business as a merchant. Within a year, though, "a general massacre of the white population of that Island" was threatened. As a United States citizen, Chazotte narrowly was able to make his escape. He arrived at Baltimore on June 10, 1804.⁹

The year 1804 was important to Chazotte for a number of reasons, one of which directly led to his interest in Florida. "In the year 1804," he later recalled, "I was cast upon the southernmost point of East Florida, and although it was in the month of February; I beheld that country, covered with green trees and flowers; the image of an everlasting Spring."¹⁰ The Spanish colony then offered few possibilities for the French-American merchant, however. Shortly after safe arrival in Baltimore four months later, he departed for southern France where, for "upwards of ten years [he] engaged in the culture of vines, &c."¹¹ When the Napoleonic Empire collapsed, though, he returned to the United States and settled at Philadelphia. There, in the remaining years of the decade, he worked as a French instructor and wrote pamphlets proposing a system of banking, explaining the best method for teaching foreign languages, and analyzing "the metaphysics & philosophy of languages."¹²

Despite his diverse employments in the 1810s, Chazotte did not forget his memories of the Florida coast. Presumably his interest was rekindled when the Adams-Onís Treaty was signed and heightened when, on October 24, 1820, the king of Spain recorded his formal assent.¹³ Although final approval by the United States Senate remained pending, Chazotte already was planning for the soon-to-be American peninsula's colonization.

Chazotte's idea was to ask the Congress for a grant of land in South Florida upon which coffee and cocoa could be cultivated. To permit such an agricultural enterprise to be undertaken, he also conceived the idea of a "grand national nursery." As he explained: "It is not in the power of every one, wishing to cultivate those rich plants, to procure them at the moment they are wanted . . . [those individuals] must be guided; they must be taught; they must have a place, where they will apply for plants, and also acquire that information which no book can give." He added, "The government, by means of its numerous consuls, may procure the first qualities of plants and seeds."¹⁴

Late in 1820, Chazotte published a 24-page pamphlet entitled, *Facts and Observations on the Culture of Vines, Olives, Capers, Almonds, &c. in the Southern States, and of Coffee, Cocoa, and Cochineal in East Florida*. He offered analyses of the climatic and geographical features of coffee and cocoa production areas throughout the world, compared them with those of southern Florida, and explored the crops' economic impact. The author concluded, "The simple statements I have given, and it being the only land adjoining the territory of the United

States where coffee and cocoa will grow, is sufficiently interesting to excite a laudable desire of seeing it pass into our possession.”¹⁵

On January 15, 1821, Chazotte formally presented by letter his proposal and pamphlet to the United States House of Representatives. Speaker John W. Taylor laid the correspondence before the House and referred the documents to the committee on agriculture. As Taylor advised Chazotte, the committee’s chairman was a presumably friendly fellow Pennsylvanian, Thomas Forrest.¹⁶ Action on the referral was not taken hastily, and, while the committee deliberated, the Florida cession treaty finally was ratified. The Senate approved the document February 19, and three days later President James Monroe proclaimed it. Transfer of actual possession of the territory was scheduled for the following summer.¹⁷

Chairman Forrest released his committee’s decision on the Chazotte proposal eight days after President Monroe’s proclamation of the Adams-Onís treaty.¹⁸ By and large, the committee’s response was positive, citing “the laudable and praiseworthy designs of the enterprising and patriotic Pr. Stephen Chazotte.” Rather than recommend immediate action on the proposal, though, the committee resolved that the matter “be laid over to the next Congress.” The panel’s report explained, “As the culture of the various plants . . . require different southern climates and treatments; and as the greatest portion of these are contemplated for the latitude and climate of East Florida, the cession of which has been but recently announced, and its possession not yet acquired; and as the session of this House is [s]o near its close . . . the expectation of being able to digest and mature a plan sufficiently adapted to the magnitude of the object contemplated [is entirely precluded].”¹⁹ The House concurred in the committee’s suggestion, and consideration of the proposal was delayed.²⁰

Despite the committee’s action delaying a final decision on his proposal, Chazotte felt “encouraged.” To further advance his cause the Frenchman decided to develop a more-detailed plan before the meeting of the next Congress. He initiated the organization of an exploratory expedition to South Florida and began to seek the financial backing that would permit him to pursue it.²¹ He found his backers in Philadelphia, and many of them were his fellow French exiles.

Philadelphia’s French community by 1821 had suffered a substantial decline—in numbers and in importance—from its height in the 1790s.²² Nonetheless, certain of its members, such as merchant-financier Stephen Girard, had achieved national influence, and the

community's members and institutions were rooted deeply in the city.²³ Its *Société Francaise de Bienfaisance de Philadelphie*, for example, united the area's French-speaking population in providing relief for newly arrived exiles.²⁴ Among those arriving immigrants in the mid-1810s was Chazotte, as well as other refugees of the Napoleonic Empire, including the Emperor's brother, Joseph.

While Joseph Bonaparte survived the loss of his Spanish kingdom with a fortune great enough to allow him and his relatives to "cut a large swathe in Philadelphia[']s social and intellectual life" in the 1820s, all of his fellow exiles were not so fortunate.²⁵ Many Frenchmen, whether from Europe or Saint-Domingue, had been devastated financially in the wars and revolutions of the past 30 years. Compounding the problem, Philadelphia's economy had been undermined during the 1810s by a combination of events, including the Embargo Act of 1807, the expiration of the First Bank of the United States in 1811, a shift of trade to New York, and the Panic of 1819.²⁶ French businessmen no doubt suffered from the effects of Philadelphia's depression and, thus, were eager for an opportunity such as that presented by the Florida proposal.

During the spring of 1821, Chazotte assembled for his purposes a group of "nearly one hundred respectable families, not of foreigners, but of citizens of Pennsylvania, New-Jersey, &c." Approximately 40 percent of the families bore recognizable French surnames, and others likely had French connections by blood or marriage. Formally organized in June as the East Florida Coffee Land Association, the associators charged Chazotte to explore South Florida with a party consisting of six laboring men and five volunteers. Specifically, he was to identify the "best tract of land, not previously occupied, at a convenient distance from the sea or a navigable river; combining fertility of soil and salubrity of climate, and of an extent sufficient to embrace the plans and objects of the association."²⁷ The association also elected a committee of superintendence headed by civic and political leader John Gilder.²⁸

Prior to the association's formal organization, Chazotte had approached Secretary of State John Quincy Adams and obtained that official's blessing for his intended expedition. Noting that Chazotte was "about to visit and explore the southern parts of East Florida" and citing his "meritorious and laudable purposes," Adams issued the Philadelphian a passport requesting "all persons in authority under the United States to afford him such convenient aid as it may be in their power to render, without expense to the government, towards facilitating the object of his journey." The document was dated April 26, 1821,

while Florida remained a Spanish possession.²⁹

With the official approval of the secretary of state and necessary financial backing secured, Chazotte completed arrangements for his expedition. A sloop, the *Hunter*, and the services of its crew, led by Captain Carter, were engaged. The party eventually also included: M. Burrough, physician; Isaac Booth, surveyor; J. W. Gardere, Samuel Davis, John Burrough, Mordecai Haines, volunteers; and John Boris, Daniel McNelly, Andrew West, Ezekiel Stitt, and John Herbert, laborers. Most volunteer members of the expedition also were members of the association.³⁰

The *Hunter* departed Philadelphia on July 4, 1821, and nine days later arrived at St. Augustine.³¹ Ceremonies marking the formal transfer of possession of Florida to the United States had occurred there only three days before. As one historian reported, "Social conditions in town were tumultuous as adventurers flocked in from the United States hoping to enrich themselves in the new territory."³² Though conditions were turbulent, St. Augustine's *Florida Gazette* particularly noted the presence of the Chazotte party. "This expedition," remarked its editor, "has created the most lively interest here, because, we are perfectly sensible of our impotence, till agriculture furnishes us with those mines of wealth and abundance, which are inexhaustible riches, and can alone insure the prosperity and happiness of this very valuable section." The editor also was heartened because the expedition proved "that our brethren of the Eastern States cherish the welcome acquisition [of Florida], and are alive to the greatest interest of our republic, in promoting its agriculture."³³

The members of the expedition remained at St. Augustine for two weeks. Chazotte conferred there with Captain John R. Bell, commander of U. S. forces at the town and provisional secretary of the territory of East Florida. On July 19, Bell endorsed Chazotte's passport. In addition, he required "all officers, civil and military, within the province of East Florida, to observe the spirit and meaning of the letter as expressed by the honorable John Quincy Adams."³⁴ Eight days later, the *Hunter* sailed for the southern reaches of the peninsula.³⁵

Cape Florida, Biscayne Bay, and the surrounding territory delighted the Chazotte party. Upon landing near the site of modern Miami, its members received "a friendly reception & hospitality" from the bay's American resident, a former Virginia ship captain, William Lee. For several weeks they explored the vicinity, and Chazotte later described what they found.³⁶ The cape, he wrote:

... [is] very fertile, resting on a hard limestone rock, whose strata present a high angle from the horizon . . . The country has considerable elevation, (say 300 [sic] feet above the sea); the streams a strong current, and some falls, or rather rapids; the soil a black mould of three or four feet deep—no sand in it: the coast iron bound, or rocky and bold: at least 2,000,000 acres rich enough for sugar culture. The timber on the rich land very heavy and thick. All the tropical fruits and growth in great perfection; more so than [I] ever saw in the West-Indies. The limes, plantains, sweet oranges, saponellas, mahogany, logwood, &c. abundant. No frost, and the thermometer in the hottest day last summer only 88 [degrees]. Sea breeze strong, and air elastic and healthful.³⁷

Despite his pleasure in the area, Chazotte's findings were disappointing to him. "We have been laying in the bay within the Cape of East Florida," he informed Bell on August 18, "& have explored all the lands & rivers adjacent to it, a great deal of Sugar Cane land we have found—the coffee land, little,—this will not answer our views."³⁸ Accordingly, the expedition resumed its search, departing Biscayne Bay on August 19.³⁹

The *Hunter* first coursed Key Largo, apparently from Florida Bay. The island was examined and renamed Monroe's Presque Isle in honor of the president. There the party discovered its coffee land. "This Presque Isle . . .," Chazotte noted, "[contains] by computation twenty-three thousand acres." He added, "[It is] a situation suitable for the location of the intended settlement, it containing about the quantity of land originally proposed to be taken up, and it being, so far as [we can] ascertain, free from any prior claims, and so bounded as to make its limits easily described and defined." The island's one drawback was that "there was not a proper site on the island for a town from which [our] produce could be transported otherwise than in boats, there being no harbor."⁴⁰

The party continued on its way from Key Largo searching for good land and a "proper" town site. The *Hunter* traced the keys, sailed to and rounded Cape Sable, and soon arrived at Charlotte Harbor. Its keys and coastline were surveyed and mapped.⁴¹ At Punta Rassa the members of the expedition found the ruins of Spanish fishing "ranchos," which had been destroyed two months earlier by a raiding party of Coweta Creeks from Georgia.⁴² They then discovered the mouth of the Caloosahatchee

River, which they referred to as “the great River Mayaco, or Calhoun River.” They ascended that stream for a distance of some “45 miles, until the current became so strong that they could not stem it, the river then 75 yards wide and 21 feet deep.” Chazotte learned from a small party of Indians that a short distance further upstream lay “a very large Lake 20 miles long and very deep.” The name given for Lake Okeechobee was Maycaibo. Of the Caloosahatchee valley Chazotte remarked, “The land on this river is good, but too heavily timbered.”⁴³

From Charlotte Harbor, the expedition followed the Gulf Coast northward. At Sarasota Bay its members found additional evidence of the Coweta Creek raid in the charred remains of a “plantation” of freed and runaway blacks, some survivors of which they had encountered at Cape Florida.⁴⁴ By the time the *Hunter* reached Tampa Bay, the calendar had moved well into September. Still the party carefully surveyed the bay, naming and renaming its features.⁴⁵ Chazotte found there “four considerable rivers” and noted “very high falls on the Manatee.”⁴⁶ He also recorded finding “a body of good land south of Tampa Bay, near the sea.”⁴⁷

At Tampa Bay, the party halted its northern progress without locating a proper town site or finding better coffee land than that at Key Largo. The *Hunter* set a southerly course and soon had returned its members to Biscayne Bay. There, in October 1821, Chazotte determined upon his town site. “The nearest place which could be found for that purpose,” he reported to the Congress a few months later, “was within the bay of Cape Florida.” Specifically, he selected a site at the mouth of the Miami River, the location of present-day Miami. Four sections of land south of the stream, which was renamed the Crawford River, then were platted and divided into lots.⁴⁸ The community-to-be was named Jeffersonville.⁴⁹

The expedition left Biscayne Bay for Philadelphia on October 24 or 25, but the return voyage was not without incident.⁵⁰ The *Hunter* was confronted with severe weather off the Florida coast, and its captain was forced to abandon plans to call at St. Augustine.⁵¹ Battling the weather, the ship remained at sea eight days before a safe arrival at Charleston. Its passengers and crew brought with it to that harbor not only news of their success, but also news of pirates.⁵²

The tale began upon the *Hunter*’s return to Biscayne Bay. Captain Carter debarked there to negotiate with William Lee for provisions and noticed in the latter’s house “an elegant Piano Forte . . . and many other goods” which had not been present upon his earlier visit.⁵³ Nonetheless,

the two men completed their business, and the *Hunter* sailed for St. Augustine. Off the Florida coast the sloop encountered three men in an open boat. The men admitted that they had belonged to a piratical "gang" which "rendezvoused at Cape Florida" and had recently plundered the brig, *Cosmopolite*, off Key West. Among the plunder were "two Piano Fortes, and other articles." The pirates' own vessel was a former fishing smack, the *Hiram*. In previous years it had been captained out of Savannah by William Lee.⁵⁴

Captain Carter handed his three refugee pirates over to the proper authorities in Charleston.⁵⁵ He also learned that the *Hiram* had called at Savannah days before. Her captain and crew had been arrested on an outstanding warrant charging piracy, "but the evidence given . . . was contradictory and inconsistent." The men still were held in the Savannah jail, but a conviction was far from a certainty.⁵⁶ As it happened, Carter's prisoners had "brought in with them some pieces of the oil cloth, &c of which her [the *Cosmopolite*'s] cargo was composed." The evidence and the prisoners quickly were shipped to Savannah "to prove the piratical conduct of Captain Bob," and, after a brief sojourn in Charleston, the *Hunter* departed for Philadelphia.⁵⁷

The Chazotte party returned to its home port on November 8.⁵⁸ The finding it reported was the same as that sent to St. Augustine from Charleston five days earlier: "We have succeeded in our enterprise."⁵⁹ One Philadelphian recorded, "I have just had a long talk with Chazotte and his party[.] [T]hey give a very flattering acct of the Cape. . . . The objection to this is that it is all United States' land and will be 5 years perhaps coming into market."⁶⁰ Whatever problems may have existed, Chazotte communicated his positive findings to the members of the association at a general meeting held on December 26 at the Citizen's Hotel.⁶¹ Presumably also at that meeting details of the association's proposal to the Congress were debated and approved.

The report to the Congress took the form of a memorial dated at Philadelphia on January 14, 1822. It requested "a grant of Key Largo, or Monroe's Presque Isle, together with the four United States sections surveyed within the bay at Cape Florida, for a town, from whence to transport their produce, subject to such restrictions and regulations relative to its speedy settlement and cultivation as your honorable bodies may think proper to impose." If such a grant were made, the association promised "to proceed immediately to the formation of a settlement at Key Largo, and on the main lands at the town plot, and to commence the cultivation of coffee, cocoa, cochineal, vines, olives,

almonds, or such other productions as they may find the soil and climate congenial to." The memorial also noted the encouragement previously "manifested by Congress," the expense of the expedition, and "the probable favorable influence of a large and respectable settlement on that part of the coast of Florida, in repressing the contraband traffic which existed under the late government."⁶²

The grant request quickly ran into trouble. Rather than receiving a referral to the friendly committee on agriculture, which had considered it during the previous Congress, the memorial was committed to the committee on the public lands. During a special hearing on the measure, a question was raised as to whether such a grant was "of such a character as to be incompatible with our republican form of government." Perhaps caught off guard, the leaders of the association apparently offered during the hearing to pay \$30,000 for the property. Chazotte and Gilder also soon prepared a lengthy statement in rebuttal and in it offered the committee its choice of three different purchase options:

First. We offer the minimum price fixed by law, of one dollar and twenty-five cents per acre, one half cash, the other half payable at six years, without interest, for 23,000 acres of land on Key Largo, and the four United States' sections selected for a town, within the Bay of Cape Florida.

Second. We again offer thirty thousand dollars cash, for the whole island of Key Largo, and the town plot within Cape Florida.

Third. Or forty thousand dollars, for the whole island and town plat, payable in three installments, at 6, 8, and 10 years, without any interest.⁶³

Initial committee reaction to the revised proposal was positive. On February 12, committee chairman Christopher Rankin met with Chazotte and Gilder, and they reached "a verbal understanding," subject to "certain terms and conditions." Rankin asked the two men to reduce the agreement to writing, and they did so two days later. The revised offer was repeated in the letter of agreement with one substantive change. "Two years and one day after the land shall have been surveyed," Chazotte and Gilder wrote, "and the patents delivered to the several land holders, who shall not have actually planted, and in a state of cultivation, coffee, cocoa, sugar, and other tropical fruits, together with olive, almond, vine, &c. &c. . . . shall individually, and severally, forfeit their

land to the United States, and also the purchase money already paid into the Treasury of the United States.”⁶⁴ The association thus guaranteed the land would be used for the purposes stated in their proposals.

At some point during the next six days, for reasons not entirely clear, the bargain fell through. On February 20, the committee decided against the agreement reached by its chairman. “The domain is the common property of the Union,” its report asserted, “which the representatives of the people are bound, by their duty to the whole community, to dispose of to the best advantage for the common benefit.” Applying that principal to the case in question the committee added: “No better system, it is presumed, can be adopted than that which has been long practised in this government, of offering the public land in small quantities, after suitable notice, at public auction. . . . In this way the land is certain to bring its value in the market, while the quantity offered gives to the man in moderate circumstances a fair competition with the capitalist. It shields the representative of the people from the charge of granting exclusive privileges to some, or from being compelled to make distribution of public land at less than its value.”⁶⁵

The unfavorable report of the committee on the public lands was received by the House of Representatives on the day of its adoption, read, and tabled.⁶⁶ One month later, presumably after intense efforts by members of the association to resurrect their proposal, the House reconsidered the report and voted to commit it to the committee of the whole house.⁶⁷ The action effectively killed the South Florida land purchase.

Thus terminates the official record of the proceedings of the Congress on the proposal of the East Florida Coffee Land Association. There are clues, however, which suggest that more may have lain behind the public lands committee’s action than is at first apparent. Writing a year after the event, Florida merchant-planter Horatio Dexter asserted that Chazotte’s reports on South Florida were “calculated to mislead & invite speculation in a quarter where they would inevitably be disappointed.” Dexter continued by stating, “The delusive accounts he has given have also a tendency to divert the attention of the Planters of Capital from those Staples that might prove profitable in these regions, which are well adapted to the cultivation of Cotton Sugar.”⁶⁸

Dexter’s remarks have several important facets. First, he accused Chazotte of an intent “to mislead.” Then, he criticized Chazotte for drawing attention to “quarters” of Florida other than those Dexter would have attention drawn to, while also arguing that cultivation of

cotton, sugar, and citrus, rather than coffee, should be given priority by investors in the state.

Assuming that self-interest underlay Dexter's remarks, the question arises as to who else would have benefited by frustrating Chazotte's plans, and why. One answer centers upon St. Augustine, where in 1821 and 1822 a number of men were involved in land speculation and real estate promotion, specifically in the northern part of the peninsula where cotton, sugar, and citrus lands accessible from St. Augustine were to be found. Perhaps premier among these men were Dr. William H. Simmons and his friend, Charles Vignoles.⁶⁹ Simmons, particularly, was associated closely with prominent officials of the territorial government. From 1823 to 1824 he served on the territorial council.⁷⁰ In the year of Dexter's report, 1823, he was selected by Governor William P. DuVal as one of two commissioners to determine the site of Florida's capital.⁷¹

Beginning early in 1822, Vignoles featured the findings of Simmons's explorations around the peninsula of Florida in at least one major northern newspaper, the *Boston Patriot and Daily Merchantile Advertiser*.⁷² In a letter dated St. Augustine, February 2, 1822, he included details of Chazotte's report because they "strongly corroborated" certain of Simmons's observations. Vignoles added, however: "[Dr. Simmons] proposes to set out next week to explore the Cape fully, and to cross it to Tampa Bay. I shall place implicit confidence in such information, as he may communicate to me on his return. If his account of the country should differ in any material point from that of Chazotte, I will communicate it to you." He ended the letter with a stern and self-serving warning to potential investors in Florida. "As the tide of emigration has begun to flow into this territory," he wrote, "I think it possible that some Bostonians may turn their faces hither ward, and I am anxious that they may have their eyes open, and not be in any point deceived. . . . If I can be of use to any of the good people of the City of Boston, or its vicinity, in transacting any business here, they may command my services so far, as that I will take care that responsible agents are employed in their affairs." The letter was published March 8, eighteen days before the House of Representatives reconsidered the Chazotte proposal.⁷³

Much of Simmons's correspondence of the time has not survived, but comments made in his book, published in June 1822, may reflect his communications earlier in the year. Of Chazotte's belief that coffee could be grown at Key Largo, Simmons remarked, "It is difficult to

conceive where he could have found such situations and soils as he is said to describe.” Referring to occasional frosts at Cape Florida and in the keys he added, “This circumstance totally precludes the cultivation of coffee.”⁷⁴ Simmons thus denounced Chazotte and his conclusions to the nation.

Whether Simmons contacted administration or Congressional leaders about the Chazotte proposal is not known, but at least one man well known to him did. On March 18, 1822, Acting Governor William G. D. Worthington wrote John Quincy Adams from St. Augustine. “It is said,” the governor informed the secretary of state, “that Mr. Chazotte has discovered near Cape Florida about 4,000,000 acres of good land—I suspect that his account is exaggerated—I don’t say intentionally—But it is so.”⁷⁵ As it happened, Governor Worthington’s assertion about 4 million acres was the exaggeration; Chazotte had reported only half that amount. But letters such as Worthington’s easily could have raised suspicions of Chazotte’s intentions in the minds of government leaders.

That Simmons’s observations were correct also must be considered; if they were, then the intentions of those individuals associated with the East Florida Coffee Land Association may well have been other than coffee growing in the Florida Keys. While Key Largo in the twentieth century has prospered from the tourist trade, its agricultural output always has been negligible. Perhaps Chazotte was concerned not so much with finding agricultural land, though, as with finding a port remote from the prying eyes of international officialdom. Such a location could provide an ideal site as the base camp of a filibustering expedition. Circumstantial evidence of such an intention poses intriguing questions.

As mentioned, a substantial segment of Philadelphia’s French community was composed in 1821 of businessmen and planters from Saint-Domingue and, after 1815, from the French Empire. Likely they would have welcomed any opportunity to reclaim their lost businesses and estates or to gain new ones. Many of them, including Chazotte, also had military experience in Saint-Domingue or else in the Napoleonic Wars.⁷⁶

At the same time, Haitian affairs had reached a particularly turbulent point. On August 15, 1820, Port au Prince had burned, resulting in damages valued in the millions. The same month, Christophe was stricken by paralysis and, while he was invalided, revolt broke out on the island. By October 8, he was a suicide.⁷⁷ The following year a Creole uprising on the eastern side of Hispaniola overturned Spanish authority,

and soon thereafter the former colony succumbed to a Haitian invasion.⁷⁸ Also, the Bourbon king of France had offered in February 1821 to negotiate French acceptance of Haitian independence, but that troubling question and the related issue of indemnities remained for the time unsettled.⁷⁹

A final factor, the designs of Joseph Bonaparte, must be added to the equation. Soon after his arrival in the United States, the former king of Spain had begun to entertain guests who proposed to make the exile “king of the Indies,” beginning with the overthrow of the viceroy of Mexico. One of the plans was rumored to involve a Philadelphia-organized “Society for the Cultivation of the Vine and Olive,” which had secured a Congressional grant of land on Alabama’s Tombigbee River. Bonaparte officially distanced himself from the proposals, but British and Spanish ambassadors argued that a “Napoleonic Confederation” had been born. President Monroe and Secretary of State Adams were concerned to the extent of having agents investigate the matter, though the president eventually determined Joseph to be innocent in the affair. However, Bonaparte’s continued association with proponents of schemes for his return to power suggests, at the least, an interest on his part in the possibility of a new throne.⁸⁰

Given these facts, an interesting scenario can be sketched. Perhaps Bonaparte was more amenable to becoming “king of the Indies” than Monroe and Adams had believed. Once the Mexican venture had dissolved in fiasco, he and his backers may have turned to the possibility of assuming power in Haiti. The island was in turmoil, and they may have believed that a Bonapartist restoration would have been welcomed; Joseph, after all, had been king of the eastern end of the island only a few years before. Coincidentally, the French exile community in Philadelphia was enduring economic hardship and might welcome the opportunity of relief through a Haitian coup. Finally, the purchase of Florida by the United States offered possibilities for a strategically located base camp for an expedition, and the experience of the Society for the Cultivation of the Vine and Olives offered possibilities for how the land might be obtained through an act of Congress. Once secure in power on the island of Hispaniola, Bonaparte could have extended his realm to other French and Spanish possessions in the Caribbean, making Joseph a true “king of the Indies.”

Mere suspicion of such a plan—raised by individuals such as William H. Simmons whose interests lay in development of other areas of the Florida peninsula—understandably could have resulted in a con-

gressional demand for some form of guarantee that the property at Key Largo would be used—and used quickly—for coffee cultivation. The committee on the public lands, in fact, made such a demand. Even when the guarantee was made, doubts may have lingered and, in the end, determined the fate of the East Florida Coffee Land Association.

From whatever cause, the plans of Peter Stephen Chazotte and the East Florida Coffee Land Association died on March 26, 1822. In an effort to recoup some of his losses, Chazotte attempted to publish on a subscription basis his journal of the expedition, which was to be accompanied by 11 maps of various areas of South Florida. “This interesting Journal,” he advertised, “is descriptive, and conveys correct information of the various soils and natural productions of that country; it points out the places, rivers, islands, and bays, where, or on the boarder of which the land is rich, and communicates a knowledge of those cultures and tropical staples and productions to which the soil is best suited.” The whole volume amounted to some 500 pages and was offered to subscribers at the price of \$8.00.⁸¹ Apparently the attempt failed, and the journal was not published. No copy of the unique historical document is known to exist.⁸²

The experience of the East Florida Coffee Land Association shows the presence in the United States during the Federal era of a substantial community of French exiles and the involvement of members of that community with matters having national implications. Further, it suggests that, perhaps, some members of that community were willing to undertake from United States soil actions that might have embroiled the nation in international intrigue and controversy. Finally, it makes clear that further research into these exile communities is merited and that such research might well lead to a better understanding of important forces at play in the early history of the United States.

While the goals of the association had implications for the nation, they specifically impacted Florida. Assuming Peter Stephen Chazotte intended to establish the coffee plantation he proposed, his plans for South Florida and its keys were audacious. Improperly classified soils, frosts, hurricanes, Indians, and pirates all could have doomed his project. Had such a large-scale investment been made in South Florida in 1822 and succeeding years, however, Florida’s pattern of development could have been altered substantially. To a degree, investors’ and immigrants’ attention would have been drawn—just as Horatio Dexter feared—away from the northern reaches of the peninsula and to the lower east coast. There, rather than along the upper east coast and the

St. Johns River valley, citrus and sugar cane production could have thrived. Florida also would have had a mainland port—Jeffersonville—that opened directly onto the Caribbean and South America, potentially drawing to the territory and state an affluence in commerce, which was to be denied almost until the dawn of the twentieth century. Even had coffee cultivation never commenced at Key Largo, Chazotte's efforts still could have affected the economic growth of Florida through publication of his journal. South Florida no longer would have been a mystery, as for the most part it was presented in the works actually published. The door to development at least would have been cracked open, but Chazotte was denied even that contribution. The loss was an enduring one.

NOTES

1. Catherine A. Herbert, "The French Element in Pennsylvania in the 1790s: The Francophone Immigrants' Impact," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 108 (October 1984), 451.
2. *Ibid.*, 455; J. Thomas Scharf and Thompson Westcott, *History of Philadelphia, 1609-1884*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts & Co., 1884), I, 470, II, 1467; Owen Connelly, *The Gentle Bonaparte: A Biography of Joseph Napoleon's Elder Brother* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1968), 246-76.
3. Herbert, "The French Element in Pennsylvania," 455n; Connelly, *The Gentle Bonaparte*, 255-59.
4. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 114-15.
5. Quoted in George E. Buker, "The Americanization of St. Augustine 1821-1865," in Jean Parker Waterbury, ed., *The Oldest City: St. Augustine, Saga of Survival* (St. Augustine: St. Augustine Historical Society, 1983), 151.
6. Manuscript returns of the Fifth U. S. Census, 1830, Brooklyn, New York, schedule I (population).
7. Peter Stephen Chazotte, *Facts and Observations on the Culture of Vines Olives, Capers, Almonds, &c. in the Southern States, and of Coffee, Cocoa, and Cochineal in East Florida* (Philadelphia: J Maxwell, 1821), title page; Chazotte, *Historical Sketches of the Revolutions, and Foreign and Civil Wars in the Island of St. Domingo with a Narrative of the Entire Massacre of the White Population of the Island* (New York: Wm. Applegate, 1840), 16; Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution 1789-1804* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), 100-06.
8. Chazotte, *Historical Sketches*, 16.
9. *Ibid.*, 3, 27-36.
10. Chazotte, *Facts and Observations*, 13.
11. *Ibid.*, title page.
12. John Adams Paxton, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1818* (Philadelphia: E & R. Parker, 1818), n.p.; Edward Whitely, *The Philadelphia Directory and Register for 1820* (Philadelphia: M'Carey & Davis, 1820), n.p.; Peter Stephen Chazotte, *A New System of Banking, Developed and Exemplified in a New Scheme to Establish a Merchants Bank of General Deposits* (Philadelphia: Peter Stephen

Chazotte, 1815); Chazotte, *An Essay on the Best Method of Teaching Foreign Languages as Applied With Extraordinary Success to the French Language* (Philadelphia: E. Earle, 1817); Chazotte, *An Introductory Lecture on the Metaphysics & Philosophy of Languages; Being the 1st Number of a Philosophical & Practical Grammar of the English & French Languages* (Philadelphia: Peter Stephen Chazotte, 1819).

13. Lester Harris, "The Cession of Florida and John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State, U. S. A.," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 36 (January 1958), 235.

14. Chazotte, *Facts and Observations*, 21-22.

15. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

16. "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands on the Petition of Peter S. Chazotte and others, in behalf of the American Coffee Land Association," House Report No. 47, 17th Cong., 1st sess., 31 [the documents contained in this report also may be found in *American State Papers, Public Lands*, 7 vols. (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1832-1860), III, 518-30]; *Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 16th Cong., 2d sess., 901. When Chazotte presented his proposal to the Congress, he sought the support of Thomas Jefferson. "On a subject of such national importance, and which may raise the United States to the highest degree of power, riches and commerce, the opinion of your Excellency will be received with perfect deference and respect," he wrote the former president. Jefferson avoided making any commitment, noting through his secretary, "[A]t the age of 77, he must leave the attention to these things to those who are young enough to aid & witness their success." Chazotte to Jefferson, January 15, 1821, and unsigned reply, dated January 28, 1821, microcopy roll 52, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

17. Harris, "The Cession of Florida," 235.

18. *Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 16th Cong., 2d sess., 1270-71.

19. "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands," 31.

20. *Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 16th Cong., 2d sess., 1271.

21. "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands," 1.

22. See Herbert, "The French Element in Pennsylvania in the 1790s."

23. Connelly, *The Gentle Bonaparte*, 250.

24. Francis James Dallett, "The French Benevolent Society of

Philadelphia and the Bicentennial: An Address to the *Assemblée Générale* of the Society held at the Union League of Philadelphia November 15, 1976" (typescript, 1976), available at American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia; Scarf and Westcott, *History of Philadelphia*, II, 1467-68.

25. Nathaniel Burt, *The Perennial Philadelphians: The Anatomy of an American Aristocracy* (Boston, 1963), 273.

26. Agnes Repplier, *Philadelphia: The Place and The People* (New York, 1925), 317-47.

27. The charter and a listing of the subscribers of the association are found in "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands," 32-35.

28. The members of the committee of superintendence, other than Gilder, were Henry Manly, William Davis, Thomas T. Stiles, Thomas Matlack, and Jacob Mayland. "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands," 34-35; James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, eds., *Appletons' Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1888), II, 648.

29. "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands," 31-32.

30. *Ibid.*, 35; *St. Augustine Florida Gazette*, July 28, 1821.

31. *Charleston Courier*, November 2, 1821; *St. Augustine Florida Gazette*, July 28, 1821.

32. Thomas Graham, *The Awakening of St. Augustine: The Anderson Family and the Oldest City 1821-1924* (St. Augustine: St. Augustine Historical Society, 1978), 11.

33. *St. Augustine Florida Gazette*, July 28, 1821.

34. "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands," 32.

35. *St. Augustine Florida Gazette*, July 28, 1821.

36. Chazotte to John R. Bell, August 18, 1821, Letters Received by the Secretary of War, Registered Series, 1801-1860, record group 107, microcopy M-221, roll 92 [B-95(15)], National Archives, Washington, D.C.

37. Chazotte's description of the Miami/Cape Florida vicinity and of certain other aspects of the expedition quoted later in this essay is taken from a letter written in March 1822 by a St. Augustine man to a Boston newspaper. The letter draws a portion of its text from Chazotte's report. The reference to 300-foot elevation was a mistake which later served as a basis for criticism of Chazotte's findings. *Boston Patriot and Daily Merchantile Advertiser*, March 8, 1822.

38. Chazotte to Bell, August 18, 1821.

39. *Ibid.*

40. "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands," 4.

41. *Boston Patriot and Daily Merchantile Advertiser*, March 8, 1822.

42. *Ibid.*; *Charleston City Gazette and Commercial Advertiser* quoted in the *Philadelphia National Gazette and Literary Register*, December 3, 1821. See also Canter Brown, Jr., "The 'Sarrazota, or Runaway Negro Plantations': Tampa Bay's First Black Community, 1812-1821," *Tampa Bay History* 12 (Fall/Winter 1990), 5-19.

43. *Boston Patriot and Daily Merchantile Advertiser*, March 8, 1822.

44. *Washington Gazette*, April 27, 1822.

45. One entrance to Tampa Bay was named Boca Grande, and two keys at its entrance were called Castor and Pollux. *Washington Gazette*, March 7, 1822.

46. *Ibid.* Chazotte apparently confused the Manatee with the Little Manatee River. There are no falls on the former, while there are on the upper reaches of the latter. Dewey A. Dye, Jr., to the author, June 29, 1990, collection of the author.

47. *Boston Patriot and Daily Merchantile Advertiser*, March 8, 1822.

48. "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands," 4. Presumably, the Crawford River was named in honor of Secretary of the Treasury William H. Crawford.

49. *Washington Gazette*, March 7, 1822.

50. *Charleston Courier*, November 2, 1821.

51. *St. Augustine Florida Gazette*, November 24, 1821.

52. *Charleston Courier*, November 2, 1821.

53. *Ibid.*, November 3, 1821.

54. The three men collected from the open boat were John Romaro, John Miguel, and Raymond Crespo. The *Hiram's* skipper was Captain White, a man "well-known on the Southern coast as a notorious character, under the title of Captain Bob." *Charleston Courier*, November 3, 1821; *Philadelphia National Gazette and Literary Register*, November 10, 1821. References to James William Lee in 1819 may be found in Harry A. Kersey, Jr., "The Seminole Negroes of Andros Island Revisited: Some New Pieces to an Old Puzzle," *Florida Anthropologist* 34(December 1981), 169-76.

55. *Charleston Courier*, November 3, 1821.

56. *Philadelphia National Gazette and Literary Register*, November 10, 1821.

57. *Charleston Courier*, November 3, 1821; *Philadelphia National Gazette and Literary Register*, November 19, 1821.

58. *Philadelphia National Gazette and Literary Register*, November 8, 1821.

59. *St. Augustine Florida Gazette*, November 24, 1821.

60. Nathaniel Ware to Dr. Samuel Brown, December 30, 1821, Samuel Brown Family Papers, Filson Club Library, Louisville, KY.

61. *Reif's Philadelphia Gazette, and Daily Advertiser*, December 24, 1821.

62. "Report of the Committee on the Public Lands," 3-5.

63. *Ibid.*, 5-9.

64. *Ibid.*, 9.

65. Interestingly, the report of the Committee on the Public Lands refers to the East Florida Coffee Land Association as the American Coffee Land Association. Whether this change represented a public-relations tactic on the part of the association or a mistake by the committee is unknown to the author. *Ibid.*, 1-3.

66. *Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 17th Congress, 1st sess., 1104.

67. *Ibid.*, 1370.

68. Mark F. Boyd, "Horatio S. Dexter and Events Leading to the Treaty of Moultrie Creek With the Seminole Indians," *Florida Anthropologist* 11 (September 1958), 94.

69. Buker, "The Americanization of St. Augustine," 151; *Boston Patriot and Daily Merchantile Advertiser*, March 8, 1822. The identification of the *Boston Patriot's* St. Augustine correspondent as Charles Vignoles was made by Jean P. Waterbury and John Griffin. Compare, for example, the language contained in the letter appearing August 20, 1822, with the similar language contained in Vignoles's *Observations Upon the Floridas* (New York: E. Bliss & E. White, 1823), 135-36. Jean P. Waterbury to author, November 2, 1986, collection of the author; *Boston Patriot and Daily Merchantile Advertiser*, August 20, 1822. Horatio Dexter at the time was associated with Moses Levy and others in the development of the Arredondo Grant, which principally was located in modern Alachua County. Caroline B. Watkins, *The Story of Historic Micanopy* (Gainesville, 1976), 26-36.

70. Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, 28 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1934-1969), *Florida Territory*, XXII, 640, 913.

71. Tebeau, *History of Florida*, 135.

72. See, for example, *Boston Patriot and Daily Merchantile Advertiser*, February 9, March 8, and August 20, 1822.

73. *Ibid.*, March 8, 1822.

74. [William H. Simmons], *Notices of East Florida, With an Account of the Seminole Nation of Indians* (Charleston: A. E. Biller, 1822), iii, 25.

75. William G. D. Worthington to John Quincy Adams in Carter, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, Florida Territory, XXII, 381-82.

76. Chazotte, *Historical Sketches*, 27-34; Connelly, *The Gentle Bonaparte*, 255-58.

77. J. Brown, *The History and Present Condition of St. Domingo*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: William Marshall and Co., 1837; reprint ed., London: Frank Class & Co., 1971), II, 238-40.

78. *Ibid.*, 248-49; Robert I. Rotberg, *Haiti: The Politics of Squalor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971), 65-66.

79. Brown, *History*, 250-51.

80. Connelly, *The Gentle Bonaparte*, 255-59.

81. *Washington Gazette*, April 27, 1822.

82. Prior to 1830, Chazotte and his family moved from Philadelphia to Brooklyn, New York. Ten years later he published there an account of his experiences in Saint-Domingue entitled, *Historical Sketches of the Revolutions and the Foreign and Civil Wars in the Island of St. Domingo With a Narrative of the Entire Massacre of the White Population of the Island*. At the time, he was living across the Hudson River in Jersey City, New Jersey. In 1850 his widow, Adelaide, remained there. Manuscript returns of the Fifth U. S. Census, 1830, Brooklyn, New York, schedule I (population), the Sixth U. S. Census, 1840, Hudson County, New Jersey, schedule I (population), and the Seventh U. S. Census, 1850, Hudson County, New Jersey, schedule I (population); Chazotte, *Historical Sketches*, title page.

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